

Unlocking Motivation and Powering Persistence: Revealing the Research Base of Exploring Your Potential™

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Problem Statement

As the financial cost of attending college continues to increase and the return on investment (ROI) for advanced education is questioned, students are facing increased pressure to identify a career path, target courses relevant to their career aspirations, declare majors, and graduate within 4–6 years. Nearly one-third of student loan borrowers have debt burdens but did not complete a degree (Blom, 2021). Universities are now bearing the downstream effects of financial pressures faced by students; enrollments declined by 21% following the COVID-19 pandemic and have not recovered (Hanson, 2024). Furthermore, degree completion remains elusive for many students – 46% of students who start a four-year degree program do not finish within six years (NCES, 2022).

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Exploring Your Potential™ (EYP) recognizes the urgent need to help students persist in college. This is particularly crucial for underrepresented students. EYP provides a career planning solution where students engage in targeted learning activities where they envision an inspiring future for themselves, and by doing so, boost their motivation for both near and long-term goals.

Does EYP Power Persistence?

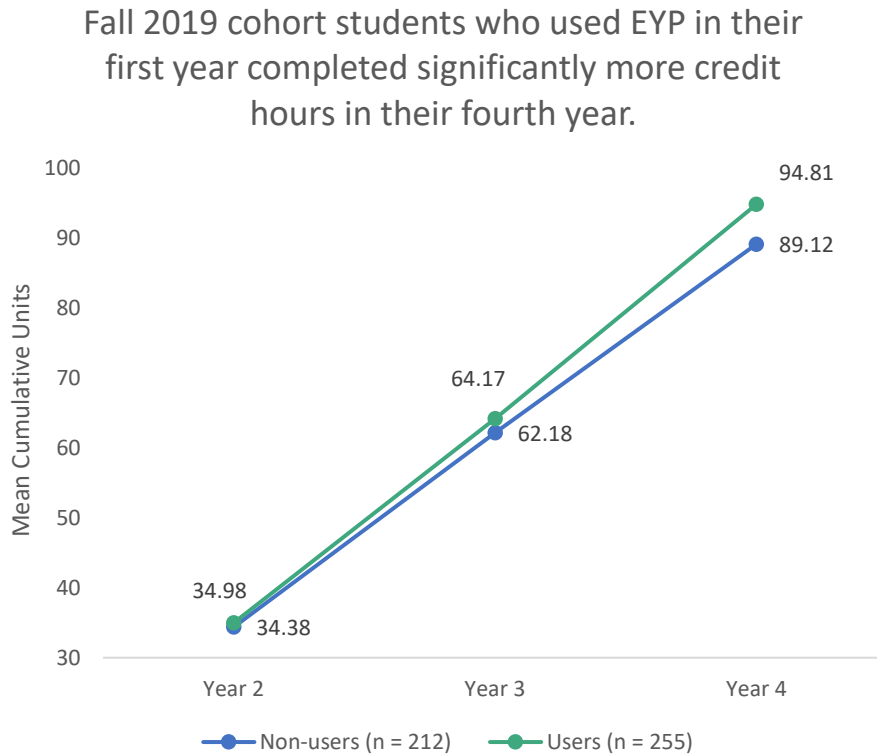
The short answer is **yes**. Researchers from multiple institutions have used different approaches to investigate the effectiveness of EYP; taken together, the studies show that EYP interventions are effective for increasing student achievement and persistence.

Study 1. Fekula and Leggieri (2023) found that students who develop career portfolios as part of EYP courses completed over multiple years of college report being ready to succeed in their career and make a positive societal impact.

Study 2. Carmona and colleagues (2020) found that completion of EYP course modules were associated with increased career plan activation (i.e., networking, seeking out career-related opportunities).

Study 3. Lee and Shah (2023) found that students who took EYP courses in their first year of college completed significantly more course credits in their fourth year of college and had significantly higher cumulative GPAs (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Course credit completion by EYP user group



6
additional course credits completed by students who used EYP in their first year of college.

Note. Fall 2019 cohort students who used EYP in the first year of college completed significantly more cumulative course units at the end of their fourth year (Hedges' *g* effect size = .27, *p* < .01). This translates to an estimated mean difference in credits completed of nearly 6 credit hours.

Study 4. Delacoure and colleagues (2018) found that implementing EYP for undergraduate business students was associated with a 104% increase in internship participation and a 46% increase in involvement in professional business associations\clubs.

“I learned I am better than I thought.”
- Francisco W.

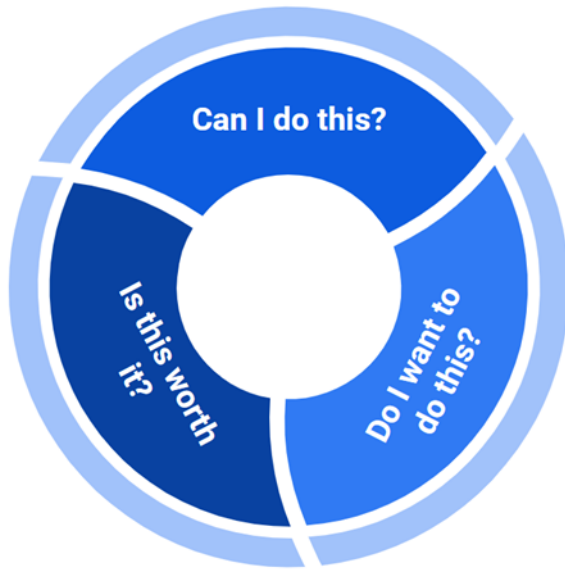
Study 5. Gunther (2023) found that students who took EYP courses had high self-efficacy (i.e., 72% believed they had the core competencies needed to meet their goals), had high utility value for EYP (i.e., 67% rated the course as useful), and felt more empowered (i.e., 79% self-reported that they were somewhat or very empowered in the career planning).

Study 6. EYP (2019) analyzed course self-reflection survey data and found that students who took EYP courses had greater awareness of what they have to offer professionally, had more knowledge of how to gain respect and credibility in their chosen industry, and had increased their understanding of different industries.

How Does EYP Unlock Student Motivation?

EYP uses an integrated approach to supporting student motivation that is informed by learning sciences theory and research. The approach stipulates that students must answer three key questions in the affirmative for them to be motivated (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Integrated model of motivation



Can I do this?

Students will answer “yes” to this question when they have a high sense of self-efficacy or confidence. Several theories provide research about how students sense of self-efficacy can be supported including Social-Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986), Situated-Expectancy-Value Theory (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020), and Growth Mindset/Achievement Goal Theory (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Collectively, prior research that use these different theories show that there are multiple sources of self-efficacy that should be addressed to ensure that students believe they can be successful on the goals they have for themselves (in the near and long-term; Table 1).

Table 1. Sources of Self-Efficacy

| Source | Definition | EYP Program Alignment |
|---------------------------|---|--|
| Social persuasion | Students’ self-efficacy beliefs are boosted by providing them with encouraging and supportive messages that they can succeed. | EYP Course activities are structured to support peer learning and sharing. |
| Vicarious experiences | Students’ self-efficacy beliefs are boosted by seeing others like oneself succeed on similar goals. | EYP Mentor videos reflect diverse backgrounds, pathways, and industries. |
| Mastery experiences | Students’ self-efficacy beliefs are boosted by reflecting on one’s own past successes on similar goals. | EYP Course activities prompt students to reflect on past experiences that focus on mastery experiences and overcoming adversity. |
| Positive emotional states | Students’ self-efficacy beliefs are boosted by feeling good and optimistic about the goal and tasks entailed in accomplishing it. | EYP Course activities include positive psychology messages (e.g., self-affirmation) to promote positive emotions. |

| | | |
|------------------------|---|--|
| Growth mindset beliefs | Knowing that intelligence and abilities can change because they are developed incrementally over time through effort; therefore, intelligence and abilities are not fixed and finite. | EYP Courses help students set goals for themselves and develop plans with incremental steps. The latter help students focus on progress over time and see their knowledge, skills, and abilities as malleable (vs. fixed). |
|------------------------|---|--|

Do I want to do this?

Students will answer “yes” to this question when they place a high value on the goal. According to Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), Situated Expectancy-Value Theory (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020), and Identity Development Theory (Marcia, 1966), what students find valuable is influenced by multiple factors (Table 2). Given that there are multiple reasons that a particular goal may be perceived as more or less valuable, depending on the students’ individual priorities, it is important to support these various aspects of value.

Table 2. Types of Value Beliefs

| Value Belief | Definition | EYP Program Alignment |
|---------------------------|--|---|
| Belonging | Students’ belief that being involved in a task or field is important because they are a valued member of the group or community. | EYP Course activities helps students recognize who they are connected to and gives them ideas on how to cultivate new relationships and broaden their community ties. |
| Identity | Students’ belief that pursuing a goal is important because it is aligned with the their sense of who they are and their personal values; developed through exploration of different career pathways. | EYP Course activities prompt students to reflect on their past experiences and develop a vision for their future that is aligned with their personal interests and values. In turn, this helps them develop a plan aligned with their identity. |
| Interest | Students’ belief that something is important because they are curious about it. | EYP Course activities prompt students to explore opportunities they are curious about via videos from up to 50 industries so they can find career paths aligned with their interests and values. |
| Positive emotional states | Students’ belief that something is important because they find it enjoyable or fun to do. | EYP Course activities include positive messaging, opportunities for students to be creative, and promote collaboration. |
| Utility | Students’ belief that something is important because they | EYP Course activities include reflection prompts that help students identify how classes, |

perceive it to be useful now or in the future.

majors, and extracurricular activities line up with goals and immediately actionable tactics and strategies.

Is this worth it?

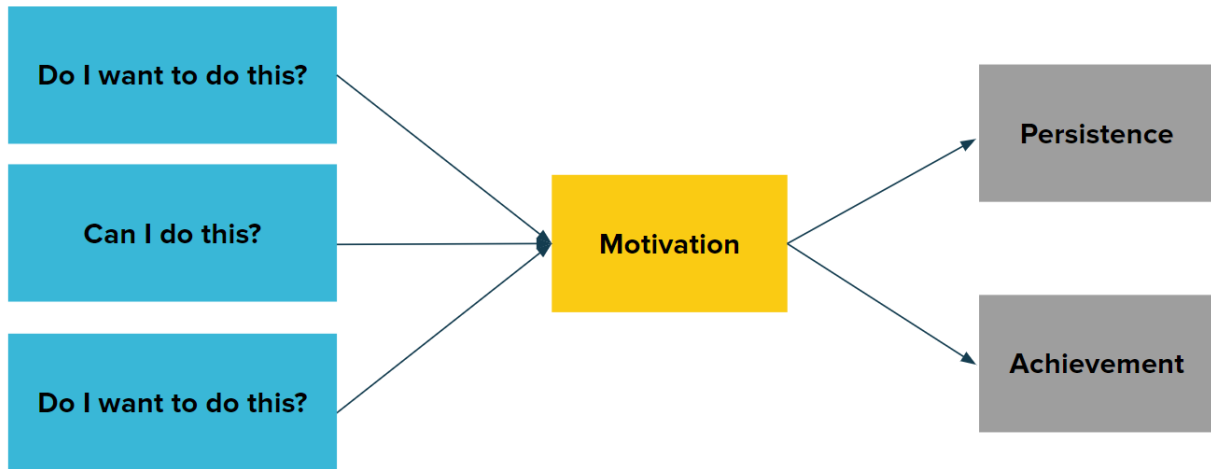
Students will answer “yes” to this question when their cost perceptions are relatively lower than their value for achieving a particular goal. In this case, the cost of education is financial, time, and energy. According to Situated Expectancy-Value Theory (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020), there are several ways that students evaluate the relative cost of engaging in an activity or pursuing a goal (Table 3). The perceived cost does not necessarily need to be minimal/non-existent, but it is important that it does not appear to outweigh one’s perceived value of it. In fact, some of the most important goals have a mix of several value beliefs and respective costs. When considered collectively, they make one feel that while something is hard to do (costly), it is still worth it (valuable). Given the backdrop of taking EYP in class as a fraction of their college education, the relative financial cost and time investment is also likely to be viewed as worth it.

Table 3. Types of Cost Beliefs

| Cost Belief | Definition | EYP Program Alignment |
|--------------------|---|---|
| Opportunity cost | Students’ belief that being involved in a task or field may not be worth it because it entails giving up a different opportunity. | EYP Course activities prompt exploration of different pathways so students know they weighed the pros and cons of different opportunities and know they selected the best one for themselves. |
| Effort cost | Students’ belief that pursuing a goal is not worth it because of the level of effort required to be successful. | EYP Course includes videos and reflective activities that emphasize the message that hard work, investing in self, personal and professional development pays off. |
| Psychological cost | Students’ belief that pursuing a goal is not worth it because of the stress and negative emotions that may arise. | EYP Course activities have students complete reflections to develop specific plans to overcome obstacles which reduces stress and reframes challenges as something beneficial. |

By helping students answer the three essential questions that underpin motivation, EYP promotes persistence and achievement (Figure 2; Blackwell et al., 2007; Conley, 2012; Eccles, 2009; Hulleman et al., 2017; Lauermann et al., 2017; Walton & Wilson, 2018). EYP’s career development approach ensures students are equipped with the adaptive beliefs needed for both short- and long-term success by using empirically-tested strategies to unlock student motivation.

Figure 2. Motivational model for EYP career development program



ESSA Aligned Evidence

EYP has a logic model, uses a research-based approach to career development, and has positive outcome findings. Given this, EYP meets the standards required to satisfy Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) evidence requirements for Level IV (*Demonstrates a Rationale*) and Level III (*Promising Evidence*).

EYP met the following criteria for ESSA Level IV (see Lee and Shah, 2023a):

- ✓ Detailed logic model informed by previous, high-quality research.
- ✓ Study planning and design is currently underway for an ESSA Level I, II, or III study.



EYP met the following criteria for ESSA Level III (see Lee and Shah, 2023b):

- ✓ Comparative study with an independent outcome measure that did not meet WWC's requirements for baseline equivalence for group designs.
- ✓ Proper design and implementation.
- ✓ Statistical controls through covariates.
- ✓ At least one statistically significant, positive correlation with statistical controls for selection bias.



Conclusion

EYP courses use empirically-tested strategies to support student motivation. By focusing on students' underlying beliefs, EYP goes beyond traditional career planning models to ensure that they persist through challenges they face along the way to meeting their goals. Across six studies, EYP has a growing evidence base that shows this approach works for increasing students' adaptive motivational beliefs, achievement, and persistence. Nevertheless, there is a need for additional research to better understand which courses are most effective and whether there are differences for students in K-12 settings. To this end, EYP is actively seeking school partners for additional research studies aligned with the What Works Clearinghouse and ESSA guidelines.

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